DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 879 SO 030 595

AUTHOR	Chapman, Anne
TITLE	Coping with Catastrophe: The Black Death of the 14th Century. A Unit of Study for Grades 7-12.
INSTITUTION	National Center for History in the Schools, Los Angeles, CA.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	63p.
AVAILABLE FROM	National Center for History in the Schools, Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles, 5262 Bunche Hall, 405 Hilgard Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1473; Web site: http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom - Teacher (052) -- Historical Materials (060)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Demography; Disease Incidence; *European History; Foreign Countries; History Instruction; *Medieval History; *Public Health; Secondary Education; *Social History; Social Studies; Units of Study
IDENTIFIERS	Africa; Asia; Europe; Middle Ages; National History Standards; *Plague

ABSTRACT

This unit of study explains the causes, course, characteristics, and results of the Black Death during the 14th century. The Black Death, also known as the bubonic plague, left virtually no one untouched in Europe, Asia, and Northern Africa. Europe lost a third or more of its population. In a broader context, study of the unit alerts students to the importance of demography and the study of population, and prepares them for studying other periods of time in which demography played an important part in patterns of change. The unit includes a number of contexts and could serve as part of a unit on the Middle Ages, as background to the Renaissance-Reformation period in Europe, or as an example of a historical process transcending political boundaries. The unit focuses on certain "dramatic episodes" in time and should be used as a supplement to the customary course materials. The unit's teacher background section provides an overview of the entire unit and historical information and context necessary to link the specific "dramatic moment" to the larger historical narrative. The unit's lesson plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher that can be lengthened or shortened. Student resources accompany the unit's lesson plans and contain primary sources and a 10-item annotated bibliography. (BT)

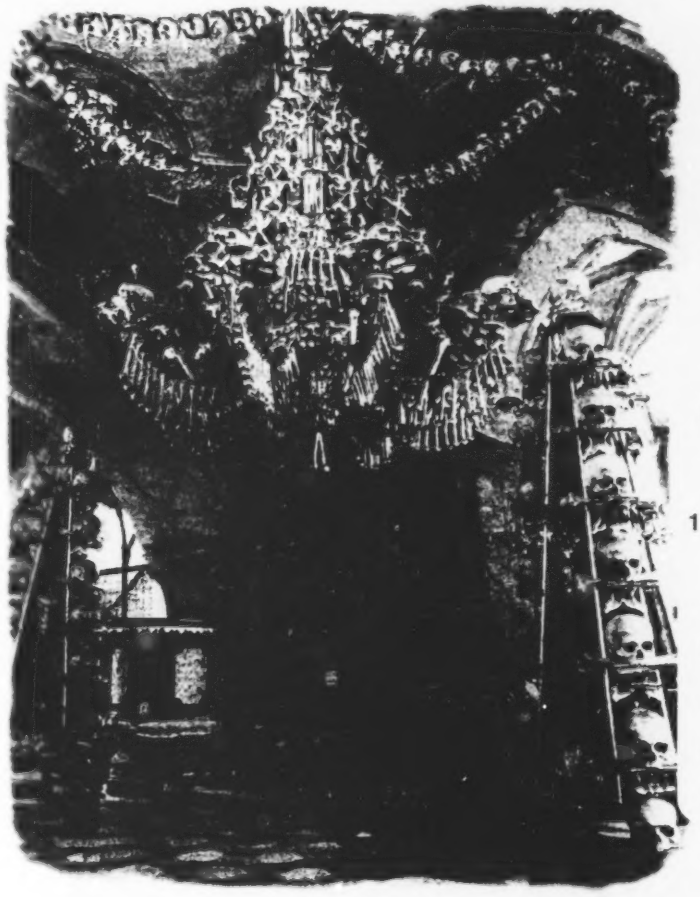
****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 430 879

Coping with Catastrophe: The Black Death of the 14th Century

A Unit of Study for Grades 7–12

Anne Chapman



PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

L. Symcox

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

SO 030 595

National Center for History in the Schools
University of California, Los Angeles

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

For additional copies of this unit, as well as other teaching units and resources, please write or fax:
The National Center for History in the Schools
Department of History
University of California, Los Angeles
5262 Bunche Hall
405 Hilgard Avenue
Los Angeles, California 90095-1473
FAX: (310) 267-2103

For a description of the units available and further information visit the National Center for History in the Schools Web site:
http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/

COVER ILLUSTRATION: ***Leaning Bone Church.*** The elaborate decorations of this church in the ancient mining town Kutna Hora (near Prague, Czech Republic) are composed of the bones of plague victims (estimated to number from 30,000 to 40,000.)
Adapted from photo by SABA, n.d.

Copyright © 1998, The Regents, University of California

First Printing, October, 1998

Permission is hereby granted to reproduce and distribute this publication for educational and research purposes, except for the limitations set forth in the paragraphs below.

This publication also contains certain materials separately copyrighted by others. All rights in those materials are reserved—by those copyright owners, and any reproduction of their materials is governed by the Copyright Act of 1976. Any reproduction of this publication for commercial use is prohibited.

Coping with Catastrophe: The Black Death of the 14th Century

A Unit of Study for Grades 7–12

Anne Chapman

National Center for History in the Schools
University of California, Los Angeles

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ANNE CHAPMAN recently retired as academic dean at Western Reserve Academy in Hudson, Ohio, where she taught high school history. She was a member of the teacher task force that developed the National Standards for World History. She has served as a consultant to the College Board as well as to schools. She is the author of numerous books and articles on curriculum, gender issues, and critical reading. She also authored the National Center for History in the Schools' teaching unit titled *Women at the Heart of the War*.

Ross Dunn edited the unit while David Vigilante provided tireless and valuable photo research. Gary B. Nash oversaw the project and the final editing. Marian McKenna Olivas was the layout and photo editor.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Approach and Rationale 1
Content and Organization 1

Teacher Background Materials

Unit Overview 3
Unit Context 3
Correlation to the National Standards for World History . . 4
Unit Objectives 4
Lesson Plans 4
Introduction to *Coping with Catastrophe: The Black Death of the 14th Century* 5
Table of Dates 9

Dramatic Moment 13

Lessons

Lesson One: No Escape from Death: The Catastrophic Plague Arrives 15
Lesson Two: Trying to Cope: Explanations and Counter-measures. 25
Lesson Three: The Impact on Society 44

Unit Summary Discussion Questions and Activities 54

Bibliography 55

Introduction

Approach and Rationale

The National Center for History in the Schools has developed the following collection of lessons for teaching with primary sources. Our units are the fruit of a collaboration between history professors and experienced teachers of United States History. They represent specific "dramatic episodes" in history from which you and your students can pause to delve into the deeper meanings of these selected landmark events and explore their wider context in the great historical narrative. By studying a crucial turning-point in history the student becomes aware that choices had to be made by real human beings, that those decisions were the result of specific factors, and that they set in motion a series of historical consequences. We have selected dramatic episodes that bring alive that decision-making process. We hope that through this approach, your students will realize that history is an ongoing, open-ended process, and that the decisions they make today create the conditions of tomorrow's history.

Our teaching units are based on primary sources, taken from government documents, artifacts, magazines, newspapers, films, and literature from the period under study. What we hope you achieve using primary source documents in these lessons is to have your students connect more intimately with the past. In this way we hope to recreate for your students a sense of "being there," a sense of seeing history through the eyes of the very people who were making decisions. This will help your students develop historical empathy, to realize that history is not an impersonal process divorced from real people like themselves. At the same time, by analyzing primary sources, students will actually practice the historian's craft, discovering for themselves how to analyze evidence, establish a valid interpretation and construct a coherent narrative in which all the relevant factors play a part.

Content and Organization

Within this unit, you will find: 1) Unit Objectives, 2) Correlation to the National History Standards, 3) Teacher Background Materials, 4) Lesson Plans, and 5) Student Resources. This unit, as we have said above, focuses on certain key moments in time and should be used as a supplement to your customary course materials. Although these lessons are recommended for grades 7–10, they can be adapted for other grade levels.The teacher background section should provide you with a good overview of the entire unit and with the historical information and context necessary to link the specific "dramatic moment" to the larger historical narrative. You may consult it for your own use, and you may choose to share it with students if they are of a sufficient grade level

The lesson plans include a variety of ideas and approaches for the teacher which can be elaborated upon or cut as you see the need. These lesson plans contain student resources which accompany each lesson. The resources consist of primary source of the lessons offered on any given topic, or you can select and adapt the ones that best support your particular course needs. We have not attempted to be comprehensive or prescriptive in our offerings, but rather to give you an array of enticing possibilities for in-depth study, at varying grade levels. We hope that you will find the lesson plans exciting and stimulating for your classes. We also hope that your students will never again see history as a boring sweep of inevitable facts and meaningless dates but rather as an endless treasure of real life stories, and an exercise in analysis and reconstruction.

Doctors examine plague victim.
Woodcut, n.d., Library of Congress

Teacher Background Materials

I. Unit Overview

For generations, the Black Death left virtually no one untouched in Europe, parts of Asia, and northern Africa. From the available records it can be estimated that in the mid-fourteenth-century during the first wave of the plague, Europe lost a third or more of its population. Recurrences at intervals of a few years or a few decades further decimated the demoralized survivors. Though outside of Europe documentary evidence for the plague is sparse, similar rates of mortality can be assumed from the evidence that does exist.

Fear of death infected all. Everyone was personally touched by the deaths of those around them: family, friends, neighbors, and those whose services were vital to the community; farmers, shopkeepers, craftspeople, clergy, teachers, laborers, officials, and governmental authorities of every kind. Medieval society had to adapt to, and cope with, the catastrophic situation. There is good reason for the claim that the Black Death was an event of major historical importance. This unit gives students an opportunity to grapple with the question of how and on the basis of what criteria, historical importance may be assessed.

The response of individuals and institutions to the crisis of the Black Death was shaped by, and in turn influenced, culture and society. Studying the plague and its impact hones understanding of the historical period during which it occurred. Because of its dramatic nature, and the extreme reactions it provoked, it also provides an unusually good opportunity for students to gain an empathetic rather than just an intellectual understanding of how the mind-sets of a remote time-period were both similar to and different from their own.

In a broader context, study of the Black Death will also alert students to the importance of demography, or the study of population, and will prepare them for consideration of other periods when demography played an important part in patterns of change.

II. Unit Context

This unit deals with the causes, course, characteristics and results of the Black Death in the fourteenth-century. It lends itself to teaching in a number of contexts. For instance, it could serve as part of a unit on the Middle Ages, as background to the Renaissance-Reformation period in Europe, or as an example of a historical process transcending political boundaries. It may also be used as a basis for comparison with other demographic events that had major historical consequences, such as the Indian population crash in the Americas after Europeans arrived there in the sixteenth-century.

III. Correlation to The National Standards for World History

Coping with Catastrophe provides teaching materials that address the *National Standards for History*, **World History Era 5**, "Intensified Hemispheric Interactions 1000-1500 CE," **Standards 5A** and **5B**. In addition, this unit addresses **Historical Thinking Standards 2**, "Historical Comprehension;" **3**, "Historical Analysis and Interpretation;" and **5**, "Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision Making."

IV. Unit Objectives

1. To further students' empathetic acquaintance with fourteenth century conditions of life and ways of thought, and how these were connected.

2. To help students analyze and appreciate the complexity of the causes and consequences of the Black Death.

3. To raise student awareness of the practical, psychological, and intellectual methods that individuals and institutions used to cope with catastrophic conditions, and how social, technological, and medical conditions of the times limited the methods available to them.

4. To alert students to the potential impact of rapid demographic change on society.

5. To give students experience at studying, analyzing, and comparing various kinds of historical evidence for reliability.

6. To encourage students to assess the historical significance of events such as the Black Death.

V. Lesson Plans

1. No Escape from Death: The Catastrophic Plague Arrives

2. Trying to Cope: Explanations and Counter-measures

3. The Impact on Society: Short and Long-range Consequences of the Population Crash

VI. Introduction to the Black Death

In the mid-fourteenth-century, the plague pandemic first known as the Great Dying and later as the Black Death arrived from Central Asia to afflict Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Carried by infected fleas that infested black rats, clothing, bedding, or human body hair, the plague appeared first in Europe and the Middle East in ports. Then it progressed quickly along rivers and roads into towns and cities, progressing more slowly into rural areas inland. Bubonic plague, the most common form of the disease, killed people in three to five days. It began with high fever climbing to 105 degrees, then caused convulsions, vomiting, and agonizingly painful swellings. These sores, or *buboes*, which gave their name to the disease, appeared in the lymph glands and could be the size of an egg or apple. Between two thirds and four fifths of those bitten by fleas and infected by the disease died. The pneumonic form of plague affected the lungs and could be transmitted directly person to person by coughing, sneezing, or even breathing. This form was always fatal and could kill within a matter of hours.

All in all, during the initial half-century or so of recurring outbreaks, about one-third to one-half of the population died in areas that the plague reached. In crowded cities, the death toll was higher and dying was faster. For instance, in the Italian town of Pistoia (where population had already dropped significantly owing to the famines of the early fourteenth-century), it is estimated that about two thirds of the population died during the plague's first occurrence in 1348. Three more waves of plague afflicted the city there 1400. In the last of these half the remaining population died. In the next half-century or so, the plague returned six more times.

Medical knowledge at the time was helpless in the face of the disease. People did not agree on what caused it or on how to treat it. Many different explanations were put forward, drawing on both pre-existing beliefs and actual observations. The most widespread theories were God's anger with sinful humanity, the malign influence of comets, the conjunction of planets, and the activities of demons and devils. Several learned authorities thought "tainted air" was the cause, since illness was known to be associated with rotting corpses, the reeking filth, and the fetid mists rising from swamps. Some argued that exposure to people already sick or to objects contaminated by contact with them caused infection. At times, sheer human malice was blamed.

Although many doctors, officials, and ordinary folk admitted that nothing anyone did seemed to make a difference, people took a number of religious, magical, and practical measures to try to prevent or cure the plague. These ranged from religious rituals to strict enforcement of existing sanitary laws to control garbage and urban pollution; from burning the possessions of those who

died of the disease to burning Jews, who could be handy scapegoats; from restrictions on travel to the use of magical talismans and spells; from bloodletting for the healthy to surgery on the buboes.

It was not until the end of the nineteenth-century that two men (Alexandre Yersin and Kitasato Shibasabaroo) independently discovered the bacillus that causes bubonic plague. Subsequently, Professor Ogata in Tokyo proved that fleas taken from infected rats carried the bacillus. Then, by observing bites on the legs of victims, in 1897 P. L. Simond proved that fleas transmitted the plague from the sick rodents to the humans they bit. Development of antibiotics after World War II provided effective medication against plague. The disease continues to occur in smaller-scale outbreaks in various parts of the world today. The plague bacillus remains alive and well among wild rodent populations in a number of places, including the western United States. It is still capable of infecting people. In some campgrounds and other public areas signs warn people to stay away from squirrels or other rodents because these animals could be infected.

Many features of fourteenth-century life encouraged the spread of plague. Thatched roofs, wattle-and-daub walls, household trash, and straw on floors and in bedding, provided nesting places and food for infected black rats and fleas. When sick rats died, the fleas that infested them looked for other hosts. Human bodies and woolen clothes, both unwashed, were comfortable habitats for fleas. Long-distance trade, Christian pilgrimages, the march of armies, and the custom of nobles and their households moving from manor to manor were all ways that infected rats, fleas, and people carried the plague from place to place. Medieval towns and villages were crowded, and within houses whole families sometimes lived packed together in a small room, which they often shared with domestic animals.

Although the plague killed both rich and poor, mortality among the latter was higher. The rich lived in houses more likely to have stone floors and walls with tile roofs, locked-away food supplies, and less contact with garbage, making their homes less attractive and accessible to rats. It is noteworthy that King Alfonso XI of Castile was the only crowned head of Europe who died of the plague. He contracted it when he refused to leave his troops after the plague broke out among both his own and the enemy soldiers. Mortality was also higher than average among physicians and priests, because they attended the sick and dying. One city's careful records show that there were 9 municipal physicians and 18 barber-surgeons in the population of about 12,000. But only one physician and two barber-surgeons survived.

Historians' judgments about the effects of the Black Death have varied. In the short term, the huge die-off brought a serious labor shortage. One early result of

this was a mini-boom in slave trade in some areas such as Northern Italy. Entire villages were abandoned and untilled fields were converted to pasture for sheep. After the initial crisis, wages and therefore standard of living rose for working people who had survived. However, for several decades general economic growth ceased. Over the long term the experience of the plague contributed to the establishment of government-controlled public health boards, the use of quarantine, and more university-oriented training for medical professionals. Because to the difficulty of replacing victims, such as priests and officials, who knew Latin, the Black Death also led to the vernacular languages. It also contributed to changes in settlement patterns such as the eastward migration of Jewish communities fleeing both the plague and the accompanying persecutions. Out of this period emerged the *shtetl* culture of Eastern Europe.

Another widespread effect of the catastrophe was increased tension between upper and lower classes. The rich who survived had more wealth concentrated in their hands, having inherited from all who had died. The working classes, however, also held a stronger hand because the scarcity of labor encouraged them to demand higher pay and greater freedoms. Resentments and conflicts of interest between the classes led to uprisings in a number of countries both among serfs and peasants in the countryside and workers in the cities. The Peasant Rebellion in England in 1381 is a well-known example.

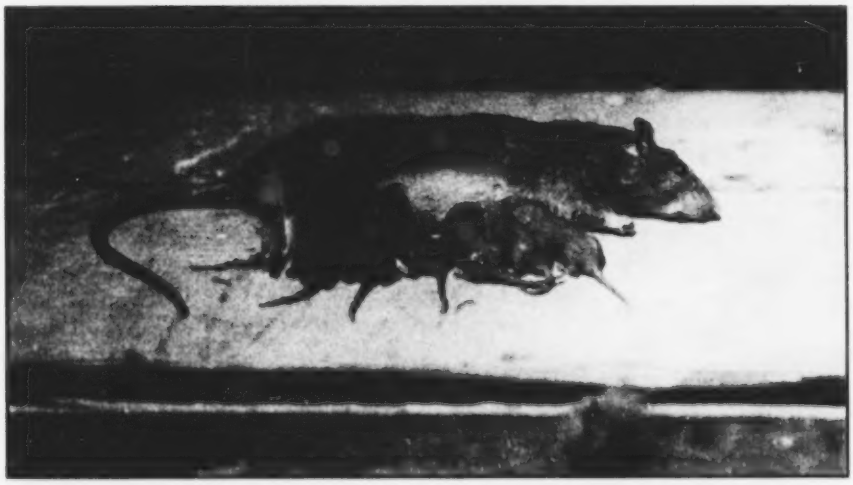
Some have seen popular loss of confidence in church and political authorities as contributing to greater individualism and to a rising interest in personal, mystical religious beliefs. That is, the plague was part of the background to both the Renaissance and the Reformation. The constant nearness of death made salvation of immediate importance. Yet the clergy, who as the educated class should have been able to explain and deal with the plague, failed to do so. Priests also failed too often to live up to their idealized image as selfless individuals. Therefore, people increasingly took the acquisition of salvation, at least in part, into their own hands by emphasizing the importance of "good works." There was a significant increase in charitable giving, especially to hospitals, new chapels, and pilgrimage centers. In the arts, themes connected with death became more popular. Contemporaries described the psychological effects as swinging between the pole of frantic pleasure seeking to the pole of ardent religious faith, which often tipped toward fanaticism.

Though this unit focuses on Europe, the Black Death and recurring plague had equally far-reaching effects in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia, and probably in China. Epidemic disease and the disruptions that went along with massive die-off may have been a factor in the collapse of Mongol rule in China, the weakening of the Mamluk Empire in Egypt and Syria, a general downswing of production and trade all across Afro-Eurasia, and a widespread shift of populations from rural areas to towns and cities.

As a final note, the term *Black Death* normally refers to the first onslaught of plague that between 1346 and 1352 swept from the Black Sea region across the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Europe. Scholars do not refer to recurrences of plague in the following decades as *Black Death.* Nor do they use the misnomer *Black Plague.*

An illustration of the flea that transmits bubonic plague.

Rats infected with the plague virus.



The bubonic plague has reappeared in various locations through the centuries, but rarely with the same devastation as during the "Black Death" period.

Photographic Documentation of Pneumonic Plague Outbreak Sites and Rats in Los Angeles. California Heritage Finding Aid Collection, 1924

Table of Dates

1306	France and England renew their periodic expulsion of Jews
1309	Pope moves his court to Avignon under pressure from French king, starting the so-called "Babylonian Captivity" of the Church
	First continent-wide famine in 250 years owing to excessive rainfall (climate had been getting colder and wetter since late 13th century)
1310-19	Decade of failing harvests and famine in large areas of western Europe
1318-20	Cattle pest and sheep disease decimate herds and flocks
1321-22	Europe-wide harvest failures
1324	Mansa Musa, ruler of the West African empire of Mali, makes pilgrimage to Mecca with huge retinue
1324-25	Widespread murrain, or sheep disease
1323-28	Peasant revolts in Flanders against landlord nobility
1325	Return of sheep murrain
1331	Widespread disease with high mortality in China, which some historians believe to have been plague
1335-36	Europe-wide famine
1337	Hundred Years' War between England and France begins
	Death of Florentine painter Giotto, who led the way in introducing naturalism, the style that developed and flourished during the Renaissance
1338	Embassy from Great Khan of the Mongols arrives at Avignon, inviting Pope to re-establish friendly relations; in response, Pope sends thirty-two missionaries with gifts; they reached Peking in 1341, returning to Europe three years later

1340	*The Merchant's Handbook* by an Italian author reports that the road from China to the Black Sea is safe for travel both day and night
1345	Conjunction of three planets: notoriously malevolent Saturn, hot and humid Jupiter, and fiery Mars; event later claimed as cause of Black Death
	Ottoman Turks cross into Europe to intervene in the Byzantine Empire's civil war
	Urban workers in Florence revolt against the ruling business class
1345-48	Poor harvests and major famines in many areas of Europe
1346	Mongol troops on the Black Sea infected with bubonic plague
	English infantry army of commoners with longbows defeats French mounted nobility at Battle of Crecy, a turning point of the Hundred Years War
1347	Outbreak of the Black Death in Constantinople, Cyprus, Sicily, Genoa (Italy), and Alexandria (Egypt)
	Turkish and Serb armies fighting in the Byzantine civil war harass the Balkans
1348	The Black Death reaches France, England, Palestine, Syria, and Tunisia
	The Arab traveler Ibn Battuta witnesses the ravages of the plague in Syria and Egypt
	Blaming Jews for the plague begins, though Pope issues official statements declaring their innocence
1349	Plague-ravaged England and France declare a truce in the Hundred Years' War
	Pope issues condemnation of flagellants
1350	Black Death reaches Scandinavia, Greenland, and Iceland
1351	English law, the Statute of Laborers, fixes wages at 1346 levels

1352	The Black Death reaches Moscow but mortality is lower in Russia than in lands further west
	The Black Death, the first great wave of plague, fades in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East
1353	Italian humanist Boccaccio's book *The Decameron,* describes the Black Death in Florence
1354	England and France resume the Hundred Years' War
1355	Founder of Ming Dynasty leads revolt against Mongol rule in China
1358	Massive peasant uprising called the *Jacquerie* breaks out in France
1360	Tamerlane begins his conquering career in Central Asian
1361	Europe-wide recurrence of plague, with mortality especially high among children because they had not been previously exposed and so had no immunity. Hereafter, local and regional recurrences of the plague five to twelve years
1368	Mongol rule ends in China and Ming Dynasty is founded
1374	Quarantine imposed by the Venetian Republic on ships found infected with plague
1375	Death of the poet Petrarch, among the first and most influential of Renaissance humanists
1376	John Wycliffe claims any good man can act as priest, allows women to preach, asserts that personal reading of Bible negates need for guidance from Church, and begins translation of Bible into English
1378	Great Schism in Catholic Church: two popes are elected, each denouncing the authority of the other
1378-83	Uprisings of urban workers, journeymen, peasants in France, Flanders, and Italy
1381	Peasant revolt in England against the 1351 Statute of Laborers, serfdom, and unpopular taxes

1382	Europe-wide return of plague
1391	Major pogrom in Spain, again scapegoating Jews for plague epidemic
1392	Ashikaga Shogunate established in Japan
1393	Tamerlane's Turkish horsemen add Iraq to their earlier conquests of Persia, Afghanistan, Russia, and the Caucasus

A depiction of Death felling the Tree of Life.
Library of Congress
14th-century woodcut

Dramatic Moment
A Case of Germ-warfare That Got Out of Hand

In the year 1346 . . . in eastern parts an immense number of Tartars and Saracens fell victims to a mysterious and sudden death. In these regions vast districts, numerous provinces, magnificent kingdoms, cities, castles, and villages, peopled by a great multitude, were suddenly attacked by the mortality, and in a brief space were depopulated. A place in East called Tana, situated in a northerly direction from Constantinople and under the rule of the tartars, . . . which Italian merchants [often visited] was besieged by a vast horde of Tartars and was in a short time taken. The Chrsitian merchants violently expelled from the city were then received for the protection of their persons and property within the walls of Caffa, which the Genoese had built in that country.

The Tartars followed these fugitive Italian merchants, and, surrounding the city of Caffa, besieged it likewise. Completely encircled by this vast army of enemies, the inhabitants were hardly able to obtain the necessaries of life, and their only hope lay in the fleet which brought them provisions. Suddenly 'the death,' as it was called, broke out in the Tartar host, and thousands were daily carried off by the disease, as if arrows from heaven were striking at them and beating down their pride.

At first the Tartars were paralysed with fear at the ravages of the disease, and the prospect that sooner or later all must fall victims to it. Then they turned their vengeance on the besieged, and in the hope of communicating the infection to their Christian enemies, by the aid of the engines of war, the projected the bodies of the dead over the walls into the city. The Christian defenders, however, held their ground, and committed as many of these plague-infected bodies as possible to the waters of the sea.

Soon as might be supposed, the air became tainted and wells of water poisoned, and in this way the disease spread so rapidly in the city that few of the inhabitants had strength sufficient to fly from it.

[Those who escaped did so aboard Genoese ships, falling sick on the sea-voyage to Sicily. At this point, another chronicler took up the story.]

. . . in the month of October, in the year of our Lord, 1347, about the beginning of the month, twelve Genoese ships, flying from the divine vengeance which our Lord for their sins had sent upon them, put into the port of Messina [in Sicily] bringing with them such a sickness clinging to their very bones that, did anyone speak to them, he was directly struck with a mortal sickness from which there was no escape. . . .

Seeing what a calamity of sudden death had come to them by the arrival of the Genoese, the people of Messina drove them in all haste from their city and port. But the sickness remained and a terrible mortality ensued. The one thought in the mind of all was how to avoid the infection. The father abandoned the sick son; magistrates and notaries refused to come and make the wills of the dying; even the priests to hear their confessions. . . .

Corpses were abandoned in empty houses, and there was none to give them Christian burial. The houses of the dead were left open and unguarded with their jewels, money, and valuables; if anyone wished to enter, there was non one to prevent him. The great pestilence came so suddenly that there was not time to organise any measures of protection; form the very beginning the officials were to few, and soon there were none. The population deserted the city in crowds; fearing even to stay in the environs, the camped out in the open air tin the vineyards whilst some managed to put up at least a temporary shelter for their families. . . . .

Processions and pilgrimages were organised to beg God's favour. Still the pestilence raged and with greater fury. Everyone was in too great a terror to aid his neighbour. Flight profited nothing, for the sickness, already contracted and clinging to the fugitives, was only carried wherever they sought refuge. . . .

Source: Francis Aidan Gasquet, *The Great Pestilence* (London: S. Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, and Co., 1893), 5-6, 12-14.

Death, hunting down and harvesting the people.
14th-century Woodcut, Dover Publications

Lesson One
No Escape from Death: The Catastrophic Plague Arrives

A. Objectives

1. To examine the characteristics and course of the Black Death

2. To relate the spread of the Black Death to historical conditions of the time

3. To analyze ways that cultural characteristics may constrain the choices available to members of a society

4. To practice drawing inferences from information given on a map and in original sources and to assess their reliability as historical evidence

B. Lesson Activities

Activity One: Map Interpretation

Distribute copies of the map, *Transmission of the Black Death* **Student Handout 1**. Use your choice of the following questions to guide the students' analyses of the map.

Discussion questions for *Spread of the Black Death*

1. Given the information on the map about the route and dates of arrival of the Black Death, information in the table of dates, and what you already know about medieval history and society, do you think that overall the infection was most likely to have been carried by armies, lords visiting their various manors, merchants, or pilgrims? For each possibility, suggest the area on the map where it was most likely to have been at least a contributory factor in transmission. What other methods of transmission might have played a part? What evidence can you give to support your hypotheses?

2. What information on the map might support a connection between population density and the presence of plague? What information would contradict this hypothesis?

3. What explanations might be given for the fact that it took the plague six years to move from Issyk Kul near the upper reaches of the Jaxartes River to Sarai on the Volga river, but only one year or so to advance from Sarai to Messina and another year from there to London? What evidence can you give to support your explanations?

4. How certain can you be that areas on the map to which the plague is not shown to have been transmitted (such as Arabia, West Africa, East Africa, and India west of the Indus River) were in fact spared? Explain your reasoning.

5. If you were a textbook editor with a tight budget and if map were expensive to print, would you include this map in your textbook? Why or why not?

Activity Two: Primary Source Interpretation

Have students read *Everyone Felt He Was Doomed to Die* (**Student Handout 2**) and *I Buried My Five Children* (**Student Handout 3**). Guide group or class discussions using the following questions.

Discussion Questions

1. Besides the fact of death itself, what other problems caused by the Black Death did Boccaccio and di Tura identify?

2. What characteristics of the Black Death were emphasized by the contemporary observers read so far (including those in the *Dramatic Moment*)?

3. From the evidence of the map and the original sources, what inferences could you draw about the influence of geography on the spread of plague? About the influence of human activities on the spread of plague? If you were a historian, what kinds of additional evidence would you try to find in order to support your inferences?

4. Given fourteenth-century conditions, what additional actions could have been taken to cope with the plague besides those described by the contemporary observers you have read so far?

5. What reasons can you give for accepting, and what reasons for doubting, the information given by Boccaccio and di Tura?

6. In your reaction to Boccaccio's and di Tura's accounts, what difference, if any, does it make that the two authors' outlook and purpose were different? That Boccaccio's account is part of a fictional book and that he did not speak from personal experience, while di Tura's chronicle is an eyewitness account? How acceptable is hearsay as historical evidence? How acceptable is fiction as historical evidence? For example, what might novels reveal about the historical period in which they were written? Defend your point of view.

Activity Three: Role Playing

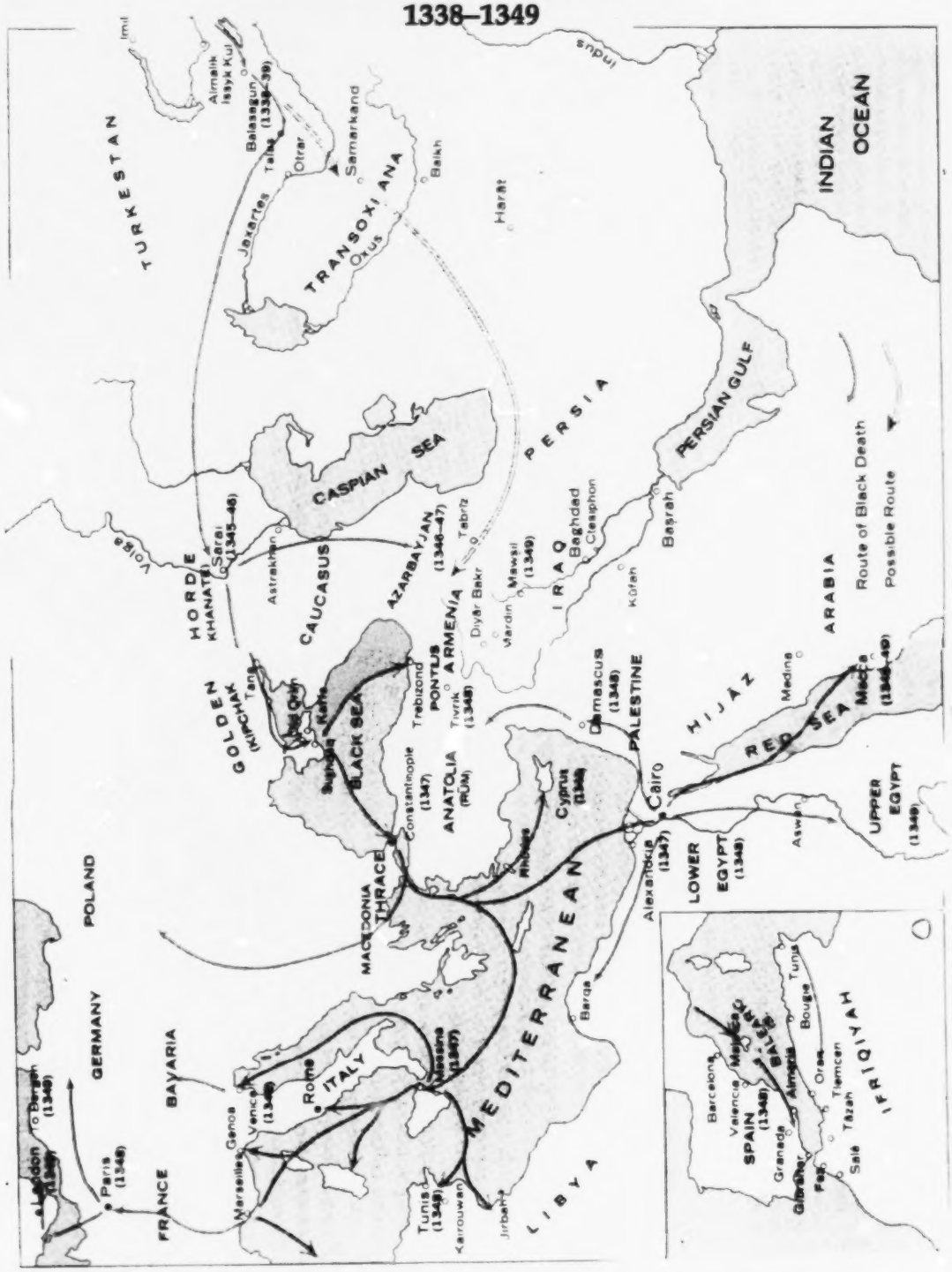
Role-play a conversation among members of a family in Florence in the summer of 1348, when the plague had taken hold but had not yet peaked. What features of their situation would they be talking about? What alternative courses of action might have been open to them? Given their level of knowledge, what are the pros and cons of various courses of action?

Students might be asked, perhaps in groups, to pre-design the family's situation. What characteristics of the family would affect their options and how they regarded the pros and cons of the various options: Social class? Age and gender of various family members? Knowledge of the surrounding countryside and neighboring settlements? Whether any relatives, friends, or neighbors had died already? Measures being taken by the government, the Church, or people they know? The kind of advice they are getting and from whom?

Activity Four: Writing Diary Entries

Write a set of diary entries spanning several weeks as a literate citizen of a town hard hit by the plague in 1348 might have written them. Include descriptions, observations, concerns, and attitudes that would likely have been reflected in such a diary. (This activity may serve as an assessment.)

TRANSMISSION OF THE BLACK DEATH
1338–1349



Map adapted for this unit from Michael W. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 36-37.

EVERYONE FELT HE WAS DOOMED TO DIE

Historical Background

Boccaccio was the illegitimate son of a merchant family. Although poetry was his love from an early age, his father made him serve an apprenticeship in commerce. He studied law for a while, and traveled on business in Italy and France. He was not in Florence in 1348 when the Black Death, though he described it in his masterpiece, the book called *The Decameron*. It is a book of stories in which seven young women and three young men of Florence leave the city for the hills. They were fleeing the plague, which according to Boccaccio killed upwards of 100,000 people during its height from March to July. In the stories the young people amuse themselves by taking turns telling tales. Many other authors later borrowed the plots of these tales. Although Boccaccio's vivid portrait of plague-infested Florence was not an eyewitness account, he certainly had plenty of opportunity to talk to those who were survivors of the epidemic.

In 1350, when he returned to Florence, he became a friend of the humanist man of letters Petrarch. The two of them became important figures in the early Renaissance. As a humanist, Boccaccio bought and copied many neglected manuscripts of classical literature and history. He also promoted the study of Greek so that the newly collected books in this language could be read in Italy. Acclaimed as an author, he traveled as a diplomat in the service of the Republic of Florence. Therefore, his ideas could be widely influential.

Florence was an inland city, but located on the navigable Arno River. At the time of the Black Death, its records show the city as having 100,000 inhabitants. It had 200 establishments producing high quality cloth, which, along with customs dues and income from banking services, enriched the republic. It was a center of arts and letters, with many fine buildings, pictures, and libraries. It was not immune, however, to famine, which struck in 1340, and to subsequent rioting of the poor against the wealthy and to civil war. Famine recurred in 1347. The following year, according to the reputable Florentine historian Villani, three-fifths of the city's population died of the Black Death. In fact, it later killed Villani himself.

This mortality, however, was not for lack of people trying to cope with the disaster. A committee of eight was formed and given near-dictatorial powers. They refused entrance to the walled city to any who were sick, enforced stringent regulations against garbage in the streets, forbade public gatherings at funerals, and arranged for the collection of corpses and their burial layered in trenches when graveyard space ran out. Their measures were unsuccessful and lapsed when not enough people were left to enforce them. For five months the plague continued to rage. Nevertheless, only three years later, Florence was able to

make war on the lord of Milan who tried to dominate the city. Soon after, Florence expelled bands of mercenaries that had invaded its territory.

Primary Source

Into the distinguished city of Florence, more noble than any other Italian city, there came the deadly pestilence. It started in the East, either because of the influence of heavenly bodies or because of God's just wrath as a punishment to mortals for our wicked deeds, and it killed an infinite number of people. Without pause it spread from one place and it stretched its miserable length over the West. And against this pestilence no human wisdom or foresight was of any avail; quantities of filth were removed from the city by officials charged with this task; the entry of any sick person into the city was prohibited; and many directives were issued concerning the maintenance of good health. . . .

[I]t began in both men and women with certain swellings either in the groin or under the armpits, some of which grew to the size of a normal apple and others to the size of an egg (more or less), and the people called the *gavoccioli.* And from the two parts of the body already mentioned, within a brief space of time, the said deadly *gavoccioli* began to spread indiscriminately over every part of the body; and after this, the symptoms of the illness changed to black or livid spots appearing on the arms and thighs, and on every part of the body, some large ones and sometimes many little ones scattered all around. . . . Neither a doctor's advice nor the strength of medicine could do anything to cure this illness; on the contrary, either the nature of the illness was such that it afforded no cure, or else the doctors were so ignorant that they did not recognize its cause and, as a result, could not prescribe the proper remedy (in fact, the number of doctors, other than the well-trained, was increased by a large number of men and women who had never had any medical training)' at any rate, few of the sick were ever cured, and almost all died after the third day of the appearance of the previously described symptoms (some sooner, others later), and most of them died without fever or any other side effects.

This pestilence was so powerful that it was communicated to the healthy by contact with the sick, the way a fire close to dry or oily things will set them aflame. And the evil of the plague went even further: not only did talking to or being around the sick bring infection and a common death, but also touching the clothes of the sick or anything touched or used by them seemed to communicate this very disease to the person involved. . . .

Everyone felt he was doomed to die and, as a result, abandoned his property, so that most of the houses had become common property, and

any stranger who came upon them used them as if he were their rightful owner. In addition to this bestial behavior, they always managed to avoid the sick as best they could. And in this great affliction and misery of our city the revered authority of the laws, both divine and human, had fallen and almost completely disappeared, for, like other men, the ministers and executors of the laws were either dead or sick or so short of help that it was impossible for them to fulfill their duties; as a result, everyone was free to do as he pleased. . . . .

Thus, for the countless multitude of men and women who fell sick there remained no support except the charity of their friends (and these were few) or the avarice of servants, who worked for inflated salaries . . . And since the sick were abandoned by their neighbors, their parents, and their friends and there was a scarcity of servants, a practice that was almost unheard of before spread through the city: when a woman fell sick, no matter how attractive or beautiful or noble she might be, she did not mind having a manservant (whoever he might be, no matter how young or old he was), and she had no shame whatsoever in revealing any part of her body to him—the way she would have done to a woman—when the necessity of her sickness required her to do so. This practice was, perhaps, in the days that followed the pestilence, the cause of looser morals in the women who survived the plague. . . .

Doctors at the bedside of a plague victim.
Hieronymus Brunshwig, Library of Congress

The plight of the lower class and, perhaps, a large part of the middle class, was . . . pathetic: most of them stayed in their homes or neighborhoods either because of their poverty or their hopes for remaining safe, and every day they fell sick by the thousands; and not having servants or attendants of any kind, they almost always died. Many ended their lives in the public streets, during the day or at night, while many others who died in their homes were discovered dead by their neighbors only by the smell of the decomposing bodies. The city was full of corpses . . .

In the scattered villages and in the fields the poor, miserable peasants and their families, without any medical assistance or aid of servants died on the roads and in their fields and in their homes, as many by day as by night, and they died not like men but more like wild animals. Because of this they, like the city dwellers, became careless in their ways and did not look after their possessions or their businesses; furthermore, when they saw that death was upon them, completely neglecting the future fruits of their past labors, their livestock, their property, they did their best to consume what they already had at hand. So, it came about that oxen, donkeys, sheep, pigs chickens and even dogs, man's most faithful companion, were driven from their homes into the fields, where the wheat was left not only unharvested but also unreaped, and they were allowed to roam where they wished. . . .

Oh how many great palaces, beautiful homes, and noble dwellings, once filled with families, gentlemen, and ladies, were now emptied, down to the last servant! How many notable families, vast domains, and famous fortunes remained without legitimate heir! . . .

Reflecting upon so many miseries makes me very sad. . . .

Source: Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, selected, translated and edited by Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977).

I BURIED MY FIVE CHILDREN WITH MY OWN HANDS

Historical Background

Agnolo di Tura was a chronicler who lived in Siena, a city of about 60,000 located some thirty miles south of Florence. In 1347, it was a great banking center and wealthy enough to be building what the citizens intended to be the greatest church in Christendom. Siena was very hard hit by the Black Death. Di Tura, who survived it though all his family died, claimed that after the plague had passed, only 10,000 people remained alive. The records do not allow us to know exact figures, but certainly there is evidence that the city suffered unusually high losses. Construction work on the cathedral was halted and never resumed. Both the university and the wool-processing industry closed down. Laymen filled posts usually reserved for clergymen because so many priests died. Many estates, left with no heirs at all, were taken over by a much-reduced city council. The civil courts ceased to meet. When recovery set in, the authorities acted quickly to identify taxpayers that remained and to impose a new tax in

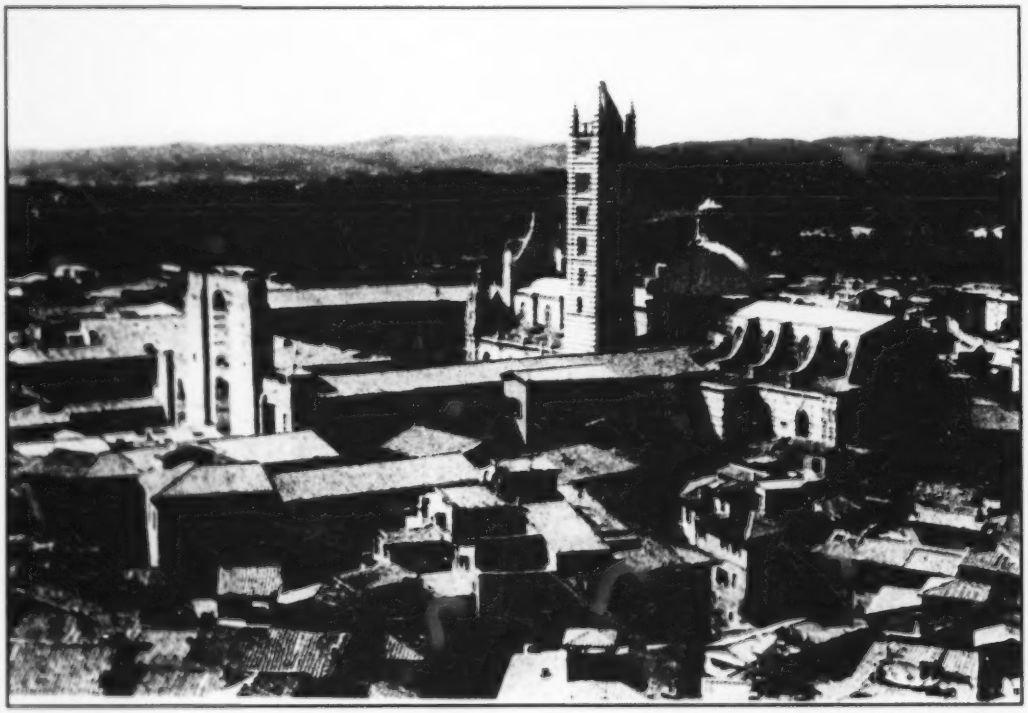


Photo by Jeanne Dunn

The Cathedral of Siena, Italy

The tall wall with the arches on the left side of the illustration was to be the facade of a much more magnificent church. A great nave, or main longitudinal area of the church, was to extend from the facade back to the tower and dome. The Black Death, however, killed so many people in Siena in 1348 that the work came to a halt and was never resumed.

order to pay the much higher salaries that soldiers and government employees were demanding. This, however, led to poverty in the countryside, a wave of immigration to higher-paying jobs in the city, and increased tension between haves and have-nots, with an accompanying rise in crime and financial problems. Siena probably never fully recovered from the effects of the Black Death.

Primary Source

The mortality in Siena began in May. It was a cruel and horrible thing; and I do not know where to begin to tell of the cruelty and the pitiless ways. It seemed that almost everyone became stupified by seeing the pain. And it is impossible for the human tongue to recount the awful truth. Indeed, one who did not see such horribleness can be called blessed. And the victims died almost immediately They would swell beneath the armpits and in their groin and fall over while talking. Father abandoned child, wife husband, one brother another; for this illness seemed to strike through breath and sight. And so they died. And none could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship. Members of a household brought their dead to a ditch as best they could without priest, without divine offices. Nor did the death bell sound. And in many places in Siena great pits were dug and piled deep with the multitude of dead. And they died by the hundreds, both day and night and all were thrown in those ditches and covered with earth. And as soon as those ditches were filled, more were dug. And I Agnolo di Tura . . . buried my five children with my own hands. . . . And so many died that all believed it was the end of the world.

Source: Quoted in Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (New York: Free Press, 1983), 45.

Lesson Two
Trying to Cope: Explanations and Counter-measures

A. Objectives

1. To further student understanding of how fourteenth-century ways of thought were connected to conditions at the time.

2. To have students analyze and appreciate both the complexity of the causes of the Black Death, and how fourteenth-century conditions constrained contemporary people's understanding of those causes and their attempts to cope with the disease

3. To raise student awareness of the practical, psychological, and intellectual methods that individuals and institutions used to cope with catastrophic circumstances, and how the coping mechanisms were connected to conditions of the time.

B. Lesson Activities

Activity One: Analyzing and Comparing Primary Sources

Give out **Student Handout 4**, *We Intend to Make Known the Causes of this Pestilence.* Have copies of *Dramatic Moment* (pages 13–14) and **Student Handouts 2** and **3** so that students can compare the documents.

Discussion Questions

1. What explanations did people at the time give for the pestilence? (Use **Dramatic Moment** and the two readings from **Lesson One**, as well as the documents in this lesson to develop your answer.)

2. Which explanations were based on observation? Which on reasoning? On religious belief? Analogy? Inference? Later statements by authorities? Which ways of arriving at explanations that you would expect to find today are absent in the fourteenth-century? What hypothesis would you put forward to explain this absence?

3. What information available at the time did each of the medieval explanations fit? Explain your reasoning. For instance, the explanation that the plague was caused by humans poisoning wells fits the information, known at the time, that drinking tainted water results in illness. (This activity could serve as an assessment.)

4. If you had to identify *one* thing we now know from scientific research that in the fourteenth-century was not known and most handicapped efforts at finding the causes of the plague, what would you pick? Why? Given fourteenth-century conditions, what would have been the consequences of someone at the time discovering the one scientific discovery you picked? Defend your hypothesis.

5. Which of the various explanations given as causes of the Black Death from the 1340s to the present would you consider scientific and which unscientific? Rank the level of how scientific each explanation is on a scale of 1 (minimally scientific) to 10 (fully scientific). What measures of evaluation and what characteristics did you use to determine whether an explanation was scientific or not? How can one judge the relative level of "scientific-ness?" Does an explanation have to be correct in order for it to be scientific? Why or why not?

Activity Two: Analyzing Primary Documents

Give out **Student Handout 6**, *It Is No Great Matter [Whether the Cause is Heavenly or Earthly] If Only We May Know How to Resist It.*

Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that the cause of a problem does not matter as long as a way to deal with its results can be found? Why or why not?

2. For each explanation you have identified that people gave for the pestilence, find the recommendations for prevention that match the explanation. (For instance, the recommendation "use DDT to kill fleas" would match up with the explanation "the plague is caused by being bitten by an infected flea.")

3. Compare the two methods of coping illustrated, that is, burning clothes and wearing amulets. What are the similarities? Differences? Which segments of the population would each have appealed to more, considering level of education, age, gender, social class, and power? Why?

4. Given your twentieth-century knowledge, which of the fourteenth-century preventive recommendations would you say were of positive benefit a) psychologically or b) pragmatically in coping with the Black Death? Which would you say were of no use at all? Explain.

5. Give all the reasons you can to explain why the list of preventive measures was so much longer than the list of cures.

6. Discuss the proposition: "People in the fourteenth-century coped successfully with the catastrophic impact of the Black Death." In your discussion, consider how you are defining "success" and what other definitions there might be of "success" in coping with disaster.

Activity Three: Gain and Demonstrate Understanding via Role-playing, Writing, and Imitating Art

a. Role-play a meeting of the city council in your medieval town a month or so after the Black Death breaks out. The meeting must decide what actions to take to solve the problems reported from other towns where plague had arrived earlier. The meeting must also address all the other problems that you as council members can identify as arising from the plague. Different students may be asked to write individual town ordinances to put into effect the actions the council decides to take.

b. Assume that the King of England has posted a reward for the most comprehensive report submitted to him on the causes and characteristics of the plague. As a member of the medical faculty of an English university in 1350, respond to the king's demand for information. Include as many of the explanations as you can that were available at the time. (This activity may serve as assessment.)

c. Develop an hypothesis, drawing on knowledge you have of medieval history, to account for the fact that attempts to cope with the crisis used traditional ideas and methods rather than innovative approaches. Support your hypothesis with evidence. (This activity may be either an individual or a group exercise and may serve as assessment.)

d. Using **Student Handout 6** as an example, devise an amulet or a charm that uneducated fourteenth-century people might have accepted as providing protection from the plague.

Activity Four: Using Primary Sources to Deduce Motives

Have students read **Student Handout 7**, *Focus for Frustration: The Desperate Go to Extremes.*

Discussion Questions

1. Taking into account conditions of the time, develop an hypothesis to account for the popularity of the flagellants, especially among the lower classes. What evidence can you give to support your hypothesis?

2. What considerations, other than the accusation that they poisoned wells, influenced attitudes and actions towards Jews during the Black Death?

3. What similarities in attitudes and actions can you find between the flagellants and those who burnt Jews?

4. There are extremist groups today that deny the historical reality of the twentieth-century Nazi Holocaust, claiming that it is invention and not fact. How would you counter the claim that von Konigshofen's account of the burning of Strasbourg's Jews in 1349 was invention not fact?

5. Develop an hypothesis outlining the probable psychological and practical consequences, for themselves and others, of the behavior of flagellants and those who persecuted Jews? In what ways, if any, could it be argued that the actions of either or both were "coping with catastrophe?"

WE INTEND TO MAKE KNOWN THE CAUSES OF THIS PESTILENCE

Historical Background

The following three documents illustrate some of the similarities and differences in explanations given for the Black Death. The first is part of a statement issued in 1348 by the staff of the Paris medical school in response to a request by the king of France for information about the causes of the plague. In associating the disease with harmful vapors infecting the air, the doctors followed highly respected Greek and Roman authorities. The works of the physicians Hippocrates and Galen, written centuries earlier, were the mainstay of both Christian and Muslim medical education of the time. Both held that disease was produced and spread by corruption of the air. Similarly, the idea that events in the heavens, such as the movements of the planets, influenced what happened on earth was a well-established and accepted medieval belief. Many Muslim as well as Christian writers cited these same two sets of causes of plague. An example is the second document, written by a Muslim physician of Egypt.

Nevertheless, observation of the disease led some to recognize that its spread was caused by contagion, that is, by contact with people already infected. A Muslim physician, who was an eyewitness of the Black Death in Spain, wrote that contagion was proved by "experience, study, and the evidence of the senses, by trustworthy reports on transmission by clothing, dishes, earrings. . . ." He also declared that the population of a healthy seaport could be infected by the arrival of plague from a land where the disease was already present. Moreover, he said, isolated individuals and the pastoral nomadic tribes of Africa appeared to be immune. Many Muslim writers, however, denied contagion on the religious grounds that the Prophet Muhammad had rejected.

Among Christians, there were no religious reasons for rejecting contagion. The explanation of how contagion worked varied, as is shown by the third document, which is from a 1348 treatise by an anonymous French physician. Certain scholars recognized that some people were more susceptible to the infection than others—especially the old, the weak, pregnant women, and the undernourished poor. Others saw people of a "hot, moist temperament" as most at risk. A number of authors observed that the pneumonic form of plague, which attacked the lungs, was more contagious and deadly than bubonic plague.

We now know that the Black Death was caused by a bacillus, *Yersinia pestis;* that about a hundred different species of fleas can be plague carriers, and that some three dozen species of animals including domestic animals, foxes, and birds have become infected by plague. Rodent fleas (which bite humans) live also on cats and dogs and fleas that normally live on human bodies infest dogs. Both flea types are plague transmitters. Another species of flea, which spreads the plague

quite efficiently, commonly lives on both rodents and poultry. While rodents, especially rats, have probably been the most common carriers, a wide range of other animals from kittens to chickens play host to fleas that can spread plague. Moreover, the role of fleas can be played just as well by lice or bedbugs, or by airborne particles emitted by those infected. It is the penetration of *Yersinia pestis* into the lungs or bloodstream of humans that causes them to come down with the disease.

Yersinia pestis reproduces extremely fast. Half a dozen plague bacilli on a host will multiply to several thousand within one day and to some hundred million within two days. A flea that bites a terminally sick rat can suck up half a million plague bacilli, becoming so full of the plague organism that it can no longer digest any blood from its host. Blocked from feeding, it becomes hungrier and hungrier. Leaving its dead host, it will bite a new host, perhaps a human, again and again. It tries to feed but succeeds only in pumping hundreds of thousands of lethal plague bacilli into its victim. Animals the size of a monkey have died from plague after being injected with a single bacillus of *Yersinia pestis.*

The several possible paths of transmission and the nature of the bacillus help to explain the rapidity of the Black Death's spread and the heavy mortality. It is interesting that quite a few contemporary observers recognized that animals also caught the disease. According to Middle Eastern sources, dead cats, dogs, and horses were found with the characteristic swellings under their limbs, especially in houses where people had died of the plague. Curiously, there is only a single reference in the available documentation to rats, though dead rats must have been found in abundance in plague-stricken neighborhoods. A Byzantine historian observed that the plague killed many animals living with humans—"dogs, horses . . . and all species of birds, even the rats that happened to live within the walls of the houses."

Document 1

We, the Members of the College of Physicians of Paris, . . . intend to make known the causes of this pestilence. . . . We, therefore, declare as follows: It is known that in India, and the vicinity of the Great Sea, the constellations which combated the rays of the sun . . . exerted their power especially against the sea . . . and the waters of the ocean arose in the form of vapor, thereby the waters were, in some parts, so corrupted that the fish which they contained died. This vapor spread itself through the air in many places on earth. . . . [O]n all the islands and adjoining countries to which the corrupted sea-wind extends, . . . [if] the inhabitants of those parts do not [take the following advice] we announce to them inevitable death—except the grace of Christ preserve their lives.

[E]very one of you should protect himself from the air; wormwood and camomile should also be burnt in great quantity in the market places, in other densely inhabited localities, and in the houses. . . . The diet should be simple. . . .Cold, moist, watery food is in general prejudicial. Going out at night, and even until three o'clock in the morning, is dangerous, on account of the dew. Rainwater must not be employed in cooking, and everyone should guard against exposure to wet weather. . . . Injurious are fasting and . . . anxiety of mind, anger, and immoderate drinking. . . . Bathing is injurious. Men must preserve chastity as they value their lives. Everyone should impress this on his recollection, but especially those who reside on the coast, or upon an island into which the noxious wind has penetrated.

Source: George Deaux, *The Black Death* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969), 52-53.

Doctor despairs at two patients covered with plague buboes.

Otto Bettmann, *History of Medicine* (Springfield, Ill: Charles C. Thomas, 1956), p. 93. Drawing adapted for this unit. Used by kind permission of the publisher.

Document 2

According to the Egyptian physician Ibn al-Nafis,

The pestilence resulted from a corruption occurring in the substance of the air due to heavenly and terrestrial causes. In the earth the causes are brackish water and the many cadavers found in places of battle when the dead are not buried, and land which is water-logged and stagnant from rottenness, vermin, and frogs. As regards the heavenly air, the causes are the many shooting stars and meteorites at the end of the summer and in the autumn, the strong south and east winds in December and January, and when signs of rain increase in the winter but it does not rain.

Source: Quoted in Michael W. Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 88-89.

Document 3

An anonymous French physician had a different view:

Since therefore the epidemic, according to some, happens only by the air, only by breathing, only by conversation with the sick, more say that it kills because, by means of the air breathed in by the sick and then by the well standing near, the latter are stricken and killed, especially when the sick are in agony; and that not suddenly, but at intervals and gradually. But the greater strength of this epidemic and, as it were, instantaneous death is when the aerial spirit going out of the eyes of the sick strikes the eyes of the well person standing near and looking at the sick, especially when they are in agony; for then the poisonous nature of that member passes from one to the other, killing the other. Whence whoever has seen the *Book on Mirrors* of Euclid about burning and concave and reflex mirrors will not wonder, but will grant that this epidemic can occur, and pass from the sick to well, and the latter be killed naturally and in the nature of the case, and not miraculously; since a thing is miraculous when there is no reason or natural cause for its occurrence. But the aerial and subtle nature going forth and reflected from two mirrors, by means of the heat and brightness of the sun, immediately takes fire and, as it were, acts suddenly . . . from which brightness [nearby] buildings and houses and fortified places and trees . . . are burned and destroyed . . . thus also by corruption of the air attack is made on human bodies. . . .

Source: Quoted in Ann Montgomery Campbell, *The Black Death and Men of Learning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), 61.

IT IS NO GREAT MATTER [WHETHER THE CAUSE IS HEAVENLY OR EARTHLY] IF ONLY WE MAY KNOW HOW TO RESIST IT

Historical Background

In spite of their oft-repeated emphasis on human helplessness in the face of the disease, medieval populations did more than just lament and wring their hands. They reacted vigorously with a wide variety of attempts at prevention and control. For the most part, though, their responses followed along traditional lines. Rather than developing new strategies, they attempted to manage the crisis with tried-and-true measures.

The medical profession made their opinions known by writing extensively about the plague, trying to explain it and give advice as to its prevention and treatment. In Christian Europe, sixteen medical treatises are known to have been written on the topic in the first two years of the Black Death alone, and seventy-seven were produced before 1400. Besides the medical authorities, churchmen, governments, and scholars wrote advice on what to do to cope with the disease. Their advice varied widely. A list of the most common recommendations is offered below.

For centuries after the Black Death's mid-fourteenth-century outbreak, doctors continued to have no way to treat the disease other than trying to relieve the symptoms. The first successful measure in the fight against the plague came in 1897 when a vaccine was developed. This was a century after Jenner developed vaccination for smallpox. In the twentieth century, if given in adequate time before exposure to the disease, vaccination against bubonic plague reduced mortality from about 85 percent to about 65 percent. The sulfa drugs that doctors began to use in the 1930s to treat plague victims had no effect against the pneumonic form of the disease, though this medication reduced mortality among victims of the bubonic form to perhaps 10 percent. It was not until the 1940s that streptomycin and tetracyclines were discovered, the first of these drugs found effective against all forms of plague. At about the same time, DDT, a pesticide, and warfarin, a rodent-killer, came into widespread use, reducing flea and rat populations significantly.

Primary Source

Fourteenth-century advice on what to do to avoid becoming ill with plague:

Repent, pray, do penance for your sins

Give alms and settle debts

Take part in the organized religious processions to mosques and churches for communal worship and prayer

Order unmarried men and women living together to marry or break off their relationship

Prohibit swearing and work on the Sabbath

Punish yourself by whipping because your pain may pay for sin

Carry on your person inscriptions embodying the sacred names of God

Flee, preferably to mountains, clean air and isolated places

Do not flee, for God has commanded good Muslims to await their fate

Confine the sick to their own homes

Limit the number of people who can attend a funeral or meet together in public places

Burn the clothes, bedding, and possessions of the diseased

Bury bodies at least six feet deep and cover with lime before replacing earth

Avoid congested areas

Do not buy cloth made in regions or from persons known to be infected

Maintain morale by reading entertaining love-stories or humorous tales

Avoid fear, worry, sadness, and anger

Do not ring the church bells for funerals and stop the town-crier or trumpeter from making public announcements

Break up the air inside your home by ringing bells and by releasing birds, then chasing them so they fly around the room

Cover windows with waxed cloth or, better still, glaze them

Do not bathe, for this opens the pores to the air

Burn aromatic woods in your home

Periodically throw a powdered mixture of sulphur and arsenic on your fire

Pile sweet-smelling shrubs around the boundaries of cities

Fill your house with pleasant-smelling flowers, sprinkled with vinegar and rose-water

Inhale hand held "smelling apples" made of mixtures of black pepper, roses, amber, camphor, myrrh, and sweet basil bound together with a paste of gum arabic

Breathe in the smell of sewage

Spend time in smoky and stinking places

Burn green wood in your fireplace and outdoors, so it will smoke

Regulate butchers and meat-sellers to ensure that what is sold is fresh

Butcher large animals outside city limits

Avoid both fasting and eating to excess

Purge the body with laxatives

Draw off impure or excessive blood by bleeding

Wash your hands and face often with vinegar and water, or with warm wine

Rest as much as possible, with moderate exercise in good weather

Drink light white wine mixed with boiled water, or water taken from a swift-flowing, rocky-bottomed stream

Drink sour fluids or fruit juice

Drink syrup of roses mixed with powdered coral, precious stones, and bones

Eat a pickled onion every day before breakfast

Drink deep red Armenian clay mixed with water

Force anyone entering the city who carries any powders or ointments to swallow them

Kill Jews, foreigners, gypsies, beggars, and lepers

What to do to cure those who have the disease:

Put an old rooster cut through the back to flatten it on the buboes (swellings). Or use a poultice of mustard and lily bulbs.

Cover buboes with clay

Sear buboes with red-hot iron

Cut open and drain buboes, treating them like ulcers

Surgically remove buboes

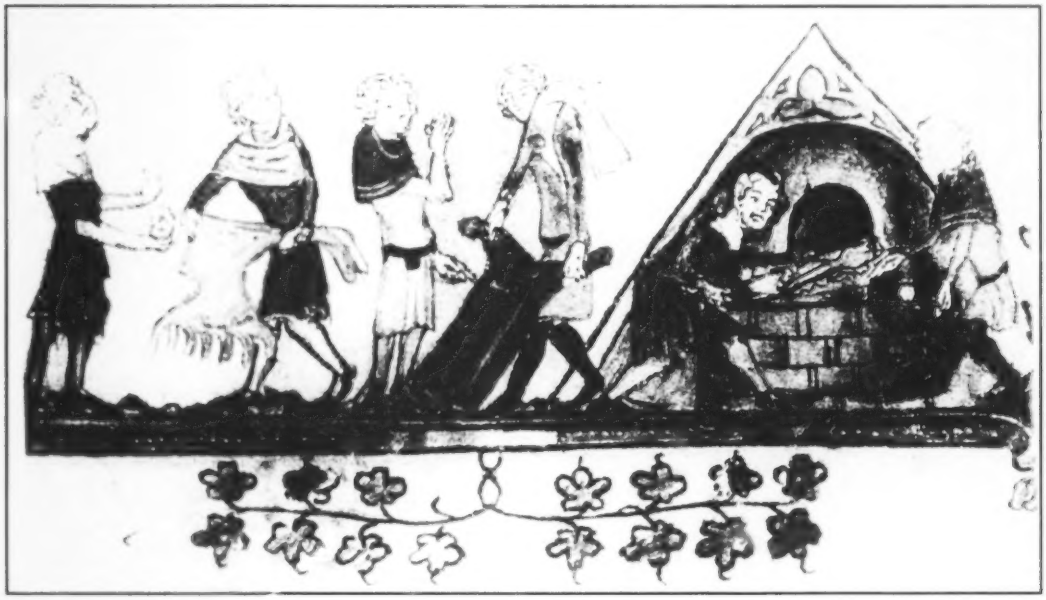
Bathe buboes with vinegar or camomile water

Write God's names (in Arabic) on the inside of a cup and pour in water. When ink has dissolved, have sick person drink it

Give the sick a drink of fruit juices and extract of violets

Draw off impure or excessive blood by "bleeding" the patient

Source: Adapted from Marjorie Rowling, *Everyday Life in Medieval Times* (New York: Dorset Press, 1968), 187.



Medieval illustration showing the burning of plague-victims' clothing.
New York Public Library

MUSLIM ANTI-PLAGUE AMULET, WITH NAMES OF GOD IN ARABIC

This pattern was usually engraved on a ring. According to popular belief, a plague patient would be guarded against the raging fever of the disease if he or she drank the water in which the ring had been soaked. Wearing the ring also gave protection. However, it had to be taken off Saturdays and Mondays because the coldness of Saturn and the Moon, whose days these were, interfered with the powers of the charm.

Source: Adapted from Michael Dols, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 135.

FOCUS FOR FRUSTRATION: THE DESPERATE GO TO EXTREMES

Historical Background

Self-punishment by flagellants and punishment of certain people by those intent on finding scapegoats for the pestilence also represented attempts to cope with the calamity. Flagellants, who flogged themselves with whips while marching in religious processions, were not new among Christian believers in the mid-fourteenth-century. A flagellation movement had broken out in the eleventh century and again, on a huge scale, in the late thirteenth. The movement spread all over Europe, though it was most firmly rooted in Germany. These religious fanatics often lashed themselves for hours on end, using leather whips with iron spikes which drew blood. Spectators often sobbed, howled, and tore their hair. They treasured the blood that flowed, sopping it up with cloths which they carried home as miraculous and holy relics.

Since many considered the Black Death an expression of God's anger at sinful humanity, flagellants hoped that, if they punished themselves, God would no longer be angry and the plague would disappear. Flagellants saw themselves as following in the footsteps of Christ, sacrificing themselves and offering up their pain to pay for human sin. Muslims, whose faith did not emphasize the idea of "original sin," were much less convinced than Christians that the plague was God's punishment for humankind's wickedness. Indeed Muslim theology taught that dying in an epidemic was a type of martyrdom and guaranteed a place in paradise. Moreover, the Qur'an instructed Muslims not to flee from epidemics but to await God's unknowable plan for His creation. Self-punishment such as flagellation was not part of Muslim response to the Black Death.

The Roman Catholic Church was ambivalent, denouncing flagellants sometimes, encouraging them at others. The local clergy were generally opposed to this kind of alternative religious experience because it was a direct, personal approach to God outside their control. Flagellantism also often involved extravagant claims: some flagellants advertised their power to cast out evil spirits, others attempted to perform miracles, and most were opposed to authority other than that of their own leaders. Their processions encouraged frenzy and hysteria in the mobs that came to see them. Popular outbreaks against Jews frequently followed flagellant manifestations.

Jews were targets of accusations of poisoning wells, though not the only targets. Pilgrims, lepers, and foreigners were at various times accused of causing plague by adding poison to drinking water. Nor was this sort of paranoia about marginal groups or enemies restricted to the Middle Ages. During the 1950s when the Cold War was intense, some Communist Chinese accused the Ameri-

can Air Force of deliberately causing outbreaks of disease in China by infecting parts of that country with the plague bacillus.

Persecution of Jews during the Black Death was particularly widespread and well documented. Large numbers of Jews are known to have been were burnt alive or walled up to die of suffocation or starvation in 1348 and 1349. These atrocities occurred in Spain, France, Switzerland, and many German cities. By and large, rulers and other political authorities disapproved of these massacres, and the Pope condemned them. The king of Spain gave orders that Jews be protected and that those guilty of hurting them be punished. He posted armed guards at the gates to the ghettos. Leaders, however, had little control over the mobs. In Muslim lands, Jews did not experience persecution connected with the Black Death, perhaps because Muslims had much greater experience of living in harmony with people of different religions and a tradition of toleration for religious minorities in their midst.

Christian pogroms against Jews gradually waned as the Black Death came to an end. By 1351, however, 60 large and 150 smaller communities of Jews are believed to have been exterminated. The centers of jewish population shifted eastward, especially to Poland, whose ruler seems to have successfully prevented persecution. Nor did pogroms stop altogether in Western Europe.

Jacob von Konigshofen was a child when the events he describes in **Document 2** took place. He grew up to become archivist of the city of Strasbourg, which had one of the largest Jewish colonies in Europe, even though its Bishop was an anti-Semite. Von Konigshofen included the account of his predecessor, who was probably an eyewitness of the tragedy in the history he wrote.

Document 1
The Brotherhood of the Flagellants

Also known as Brethren of the Cross, the flagellants took upon themselves the repentance of the people, for the sins they had committed, and offered prayers and supplications for the averting of this plague. This Order consisted chiefly of persons of the lower class. . . . But as these brotherhoods . . . were welcomed by the people with venerations and enthusiasm, many nobles and ecclesiastics ranged themselves under their standard; and their bands were not infrequently augmented by children, honourable women and nuns; so powerfully were minds of the most opposite temperaments enslaved by this infatuation. They marched through the cities, in well organized processions, with leaders and singers; their heads covered as far as the eyes; their look fixed on the ground, accompanied by every token of the deepest contritions and mourning. They were robed in sombre garments, with red crosses on the breast, back, and cap, and bore triple scourges, tied in three of four knots, in which points of iron were fixed. Tapers and magnificent banners of velvet and cloth of gold, were carried before them; wherever they made their appearance, they were welcomed by the ringing of bells; and the people flocked form all quarters, to listen to their hymns and to witness their penance, with devotion and tears.

. . . Whoever was desirous of joining the brotherhood was bound to remain in it thirty-four days, and to have four pence per day at his own disposal, so that he might not be burthensome to any one; if married, he was obliged to have the sanction of his wife, and give the assurance that he was reconciled to all men. The Brothers of the Cross were not permitted to seek for free quarters, or even to enter a house without having been invited; they were forbidden to converse with females.

Flagellant

When they arrived at the place of flagellation, they stripped the upper part of their bodies and put off their shoes, keeping on only a linen dress, reaching from the waist to the ancles. They then lay down in a large circle, in different positions, according to the nature of their crime: the adulterer with his face to the ground; the perjurer on one side, holding up three of this fingers, & c., and were then castigated, some more and some less, by the Master, who ordered them to rise in the words of prescribed form. Upon this, they scourged themselves, amid the singing of psalms and loud supplicaitons for the averting of the plague, with genuflexions, and other ceremonies. . . .

Source: J.C.F. Hecker, *The Epidemics of the Middle Ages*, trans. B.G. Babington (London: Sydenham Society, 1844), 32-34, 37-40.

Document 2
The Jews of Strasbourg

From what this epidemic came, all wise teachers and physicians could only say that it was God's will. And as the plague was now here, so was it in other places, and lasted more than a whole year. This epidemic also came to Strasbourg in the summer of the above mentioned year [1349], and it is estimated that about sixteen thousand people died.

In the matter of this plague the Jews throughout the world were reviled and accused in all lands of having caused it through the poison which they are said to have put into the water and the wells - that is what they were accused of - and for this reason the Jews were burnt all the way from the Mediterranean into Germany, but not in Avignon, for the pope protected them there.

Nevertheless they tortured a number of Jews in Berne and Zofingen [Switzerland] who then admitted that they had put poison into many wells, and they also found the poison in the wells, Thereupon they burnt the Jews in many towns and wrote of this affair to Strasbourg, Freiburg, and Basel in order that they too should burn their Jews. But the leaders in these three cities in whose hands the government lay did not believe that anything ought to be done to the Jews. However in Basel the citizens marched to the city-hall and compelled the council to take an oath that they would burn the Jews, and that they would allow no Jew to enter the city for the next two hundred years. Thereupon the Jews were arrested in all these places and a conference was arranged to meet at Benfled [Alsace, February 8, 1349]. The Bishop of Strasbourgh [Berthold II], all the feudal lords of Alsace, and representatives of the three above mentioned cities came there. The deputies of the city of Strasbourg were asked what they were going to do with their Jews. They answered and said that they knew no evil of them. Then they asked the Strasbourgers why they had closed the wells and put away the buckets, and there was a great indignation and clamor against the deputies from Strasbourg. So finally the Bishop and the lords and the Imperial Cities agreed to do away with the Jews. The result was that they were burnt in many cities, and wherever they were expelled they were caught by the peasants and stabbed to death or drowned. . . .

[The town-council of Strasbourg which wanted to save the Jews was deposed on the 9th–10th of February, and the new council gave in to the mob, who then arrested the Jews on Friday, the 13th.]

On Saturday—that was St. Valentine's Day—they burnt the Jews on a wooden platform in their cemetery. There were about two thousand people of them. Those who wanted to baptize themselves were spared. [Some say that about a thousand accepted baptism.] Many small children were taken out of the fire and

baptized against the will of their fathers and mothers. And everything that was owed to the Jews was cancelled, and the Jews had to surrender all pledges and notes that they had taken for debts. The council, however, took the cash that the Jews possessed and divided it among the working-men proportionately. The money was indeed the thing that killed the Jews. If they had been poor and if the feudal lords had not been in debt to them, they would not have been burnt. After this wealth was divided among the artisans some gave their share to the Cathedral or to the Church on the advice of their confessors.

Thus were the Jews burnt at Strasbourg, and in the same year in all the cities of the Rhine, whether Free Cities or Imperial Cities or cities belonging to the lords. In some towns they burnt the Jews after a trial, in others, without a trial. In some cities the Jews themselves set fire to their houses and cremated themselves.

Source: Quoted in Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World* (New York: Atheneum, 1981), 45-46.

Jews of the city of Cologne in Germany being burned alive as scapegoats for the Black Death.

Source: Hartmann Schedel *Liber Chronicarum,* 1493. (Reprinted in Munich: Köbol, 1965)

Lesson Three
The Impact on Society:
Short and Long-range Consequences of the Population Crash

A. Objectives

1. To help students analyze the impact of rapid demographic change on society.

2. To lead students to recognize the complexity of the Black Death's consequences.

3. To add to students' empathetic acquaintance with fourteenth-century conditions of life and thought.

4. To encourage the habit of comparing and analyzing different kinds of historical evidence for reliability.

5. To alert students to ways of assessing the historical significance of various events and developments.

B. Lesson Activities

Activity One: Making Inferences from a Primary Source

Read **Student Handout 8**, *There Was Such a Lack of Servants No One Knew What to Do* (a document by Knighton). What can you infer about the social class, point of view, and motives of its author?

Activity Two: Comparing Primary Sources

Read Boccaccio's account of the Black Death. (**Student Handout 2** from **Lesson One**) In what ways does Knighton's description of the Black Death (**Student Handout 8**) differ from Boccaccio's? How would you account for the differences?

Activity Three: Analyzing Charts and Figures

Compare **Student Handouts 9–11**. Which of the three sets of changes shown in the charts and figures (Price of Wheat, Wages of Craftsmen, Labor Services of Serfs) do you consider the most significant? By what measures are you evaluating "significance?" What other measures of significance could you use?

Activity Four: What is Good Historical Evidence?

1. For each of the four selections in this lesson, what reasons can you give for considering it reliable historical evidence, and what reasons for questioning its reliability? Which of the four selections do you consider most reliable as historical evidence, and why?

2. What are the relative advantages and disadvantages as historical evidence of written documents and numerical evidence? Explain.

Activity Five: Understanding Via Role-playing and Art

1. Ask students to assume the roles of king, noble landlord, skilled craftsperson, bourgeois housewife, free peasant, serf, servant girl, unskilled urban worker, and perhaps other social types decided on in discussion. Have each historical character explain to a traveler from an area little touched by the Black Death the impact that the plague, which killed half the population in your neighborhood a few years earlier, had on your economic circumstances. Take into account income, expenditure, losses, inheritance, job opportunities, nature of occupation, and any other factors you might consider relevant. Draw on the documentary evidence in the unit for evidence. (This activity may serve as assessment.)

2. Create a work of art, perhaps a version of the Dance of Death, that models the attitudes, visions, and emotions characteristic of artistic responses to the plague pandemic.

A German version of the "Dance of Death."

Source: Hartmann Schedel *Liber Chronicarum*, 1493. (Reprinted in Munich: Köbol, 1965)

LEGACIES OF THE CRISIS

Historical Background

The significance of changes in society resulting from the Black Death is a matter of debate among historians. No one disagrees that the Black Death and plague recurrences caused the populations of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East to take a spectacular nosedive. Moreover, demographic recovery was slow. Only around 1550 did Europe's population reach the level it had been before 1348. However, the populations of European countries had already begun to decline during the first half of that century. This was partly due to the rapid population growth and expansion in the previous century. This had made it necessary to cultivate unproductive, marginal land because the better land had already been put to the plow to meet the increasing demand for food. This practice in tern depressed wages, created unemployment, and left many people impoverished. Major outbreaks of animal disease, plus recurring poor harvests resulting from climatic change, also contributed to gradual population decline. More people were starving or dying of malnutrition-related illness even before the arrival of the Black Death.

One of the immediate consequences of the pandemic was a crisis in the workforce. The rapid loss of workers in every occupation, and of customers for every product, resulted first of all in economic dislocation. Demand for goods fell abruptly and steeply, and both prices and wages plummeted. Many enterprises shut down. Farms and building programs were abandoned; textile workshops and universities closed. After the Black Death and the panic-stage passed, surviving workers came to be much in demand. This labor scarcity drove wages and prices up. In 1363, a Florentine chronicler observed: "Serving girls and unskilled women with no experience in service . . . and [others] working with their hands want three times or more their usual pay. . . ." In many cases people previously held to be unqualified had to be allowed to do jobs for which no one qualified could be found. Women, contrary to tradition, were permitted to serve as witnesses. Scribes not admitted to the guild of notaries could draw up legal contracts. People who knew no Latin were hired as teachers. There was employment for everyone. Contemporaries commented on the fact that beggars had disappeared, and "there were not at that time any needy poor." A general, long-term increase in the income and standard of living of the lower classes was one of the legacies of the Black Death.

The practice of exchanging serfdom for freedom by making a lump sum cash payment and thereafter paying the landlord a money rent instead of labor service had been going on in Europe for many generations. However, it became much more widespread after the Black Death when labor was at a premium. If a lord refused his serfs' demand for freedom, they would simply leave, knowing

that many other lords were eager for workers and only too pleased to give them what they wanted. Serfs often upped the ante, demanding not only freedom and a small rent payment, but also assurances that the lord would provide them with the loan of oxen, seed-corn, tools, or other privileges in return for their agreeing to stay on. In response to this labor squeeze, many landlords turned from the growing crops to raising sheep, which was less labor-intensive. Records from the Middle Eastern show a significant increase in protein in working class diets and consumption of mutton almost doubling.

Every few years in the second half of the fourteenth-century royal decrees and laws were enacted demanding that workers stop asking for and employers stop paying wages higher than they were 1347. This shows how widespread wage hikes were and how impossible was to control them. Other evidence also shows that the working classes benefited from the labor shortage. The size of the average peasant holding increased. This affected inheritance patterns: it became common for all the sons in a family, not just the eldest son, to inherit a piece of the father's lands. By the fifteenth century even daughters were getting a piece of the estate as a legacy. The upper classes repeatedly complained about and enacted laws to control increased spending by workers, who were buying clothes and other personal items traditionally thought appropriate only for the bourgeoisie or nobility. Ordinances were repeatedly issued to regulate the size of sleeves, the length of women's dresses, the kind of fur used to trim collars, and the types of food served at weddings of different social classes. These regulations had little or no effect. In fact, tensions between classes led to several major uprisings by peasants and urban workers, though such revolts were not unknown before the Black Death.

The plague discredited the leaders of society—the medical, political, intellectual, and religious authorities who had clearly failed in their social responsibility to protect the welfare of the people. For instance, although many clergymen admirably risked their lives during plague outbreaks by visiting the sick, hearing confessions, and giving final rites, many others did not. Whatever the precise reality, the perception was widespread perception at the time that the churchmen's behavior in this crisis was disappointing at best and despicable at worst. Of twenty-two European chroniclers who commented on the behavior of the clergy during the pestilence, only one is entirely favorable. Most of the others are wholly, and sometimes virulently critical. A bishop in England wrote to his flock that "since no priest can be found willing . . . to visit the sick and administer to them the sacraments of the church," he gave permission to plague victims on the point of death to confess their sins to anyone, clergyman or not. He added, as if in proof of ultimate desperation, "if no man is present, even to a woman." John Wycliffe and Martin Luther would both later argue in favor of the "priesthood of all believers," considering ordained priests unnecessary.

The Black Death undoubtedly influenced the visual arts for a century or more. Paintings of plague-protecting saints were popular, especially on banners carried in the many religious processions, also pictures showing victims being shot by demons with plague-arrows. Scenes of the Dance of Death became very common: death represented as a skeleton leading by the hand a procession of kings, princes, bishops, merchants, good wives and beggars in a long dancing line towards the grave. Typical of the mood is the tomb of a cardinal who died just before 1400. It has a sculpture showing his decomposing body with the inscription, "Let the great and humble, by our example, see well to what state they shall be inexorably reduced . . . rotten corpse, morsel and meal for worms." In line with the broader anti-authoritarian attitudes of the times, artists and scholars began to be more innovative than had earlier generations. The arts became more naturalistic and observation-based, while scholarly writers dared to look at pagan sources instead of restricting themselves to Christian authorities. They also began to write in vernacular languages, not just in Latin, the language of the Church.

Finally, violence and lawlessness increased in the aftermath of the Black Death. For instance, twice as many homicides occurred in England in the twenty-year period after 1349 than between 1320 and 1340, even though the population had drastically declined.

Part of a scene from the French *Dance of Death.*
Bibliothèque Nationale

THERE WAS SUCH A LACK OF SERVANTS NO ONE KNEW WHAT TO DO

The English chronicler Henry Knighton wrote about the effects of the Black Death in England in 1348-50 as follows:

Primary Source

And the price of everything was cheap, because of the fear of death; there were very few who took any care for their wealth, or for anything else. For a man could buy a horse for half a mark, which before was worth forty shillings, a large fat ox for four shillings, a cow for twelve pence, . . . a lamb for two pence, an fat pig for five pence, an stone of wool for nine pence. And the sheep and cattle wandered about through the fields and among the crops, and there was no one to go after them or to collect them. They perished in countless numbers everywhere, in secluded ditches and hedges, for lack of watching, since there was such a lack of serfs and servants, that no one knew what he should do. . . .

In the following autumn, one could not hire a reaper at a lower wage than eight pence with food, or a mower at less than twelve pence with food. Because of this, much grain rotted in the fields for lack of harvesting, but in the year of the plague, as was said above, among other things there was so great an abundance of all kinds of grain that no one seemed to have concerned himself about it.

. . . One could hardly hire a chaplain to minister to any church for less than . . . ten marks, and whereas, before the pestilence, when there were plenty of priests, one could hire a chaplain for five or four marks or for two marks, with board . . . But within a short time a very great multitude whose wives had died of the plague rushed into holy orders. Of these many were illiterate and, it seemed, simply laymen who knew nothing except how to read to some extent. The hides of cattle went up from a low price to twelve pence, and for shoes the price went to ten, twelve, fourteen pence. . . .

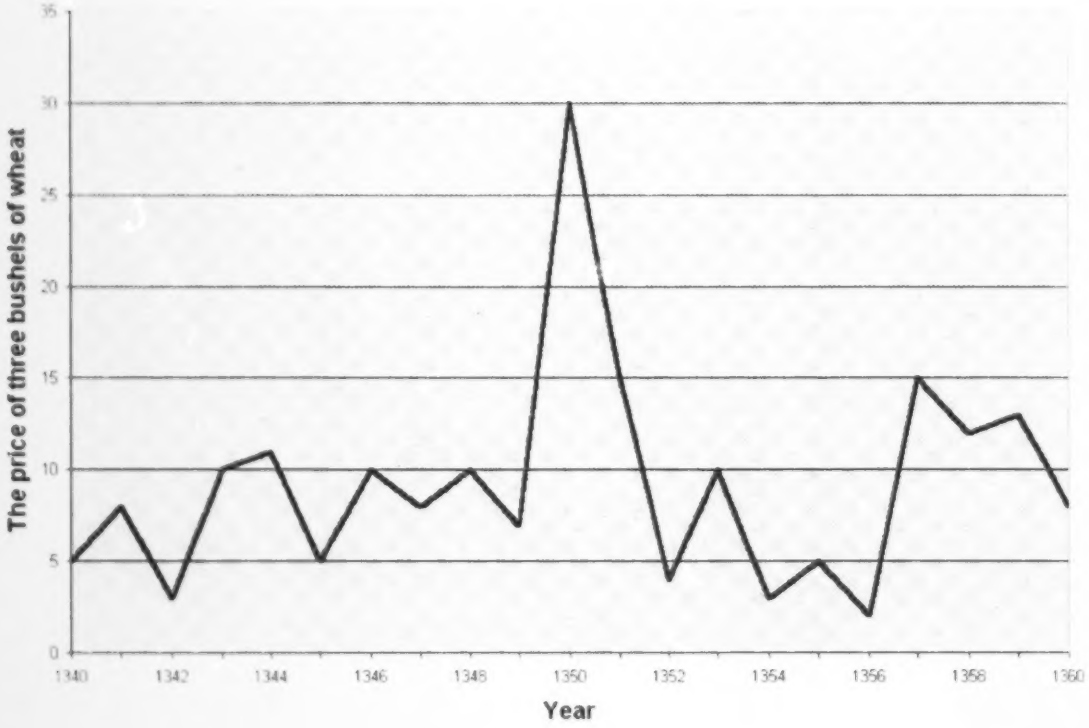
Meanwhile, the king ordered that in every county of the kingdom, reapers and other labourers should not receive more than they were accustomed to receive, under the penalty provided in the statue, and he renewed the statute from this time. The labourers, however, were so arrogant and hostile that they did not heed the king's command, but if anyone wished to hire them, he had to pay them what they wanted, and either lose his fruits and crops or satisfy the arrogant and greedy desire of the labourers as they wished. When it was made known to the king that they had not obeyed his mandate, and had paid higher wages to the labourers, he imposed heavy fines. . . . from each according to what he could pay

. . . Then the king had many labourers arrested, and put them in prison. Many such hid themselves and ran away to the forests and woods for a while and those who were captured were heavily fined. . . .

After the aforesaid pestilence, many buildings, both large and small, in all cities, towns, and villages had collapsed, and had completely fallen to the ground in the absence of inhabitants. Likewise, many small villages and hamlets were completely deserted; there was not one house left in them, but all those who had lived tin them were dead. It is likely that many such hamlets will never again be inhabited. In the following summer [1350], there was so great a lack of servants to do anything that, as one believed, there had hardly been so great a dearth in past times. For all the beasts and cattle that a man possessed wandered about without a shepherd, and everything a man had was without a caretaker. And so all necessities became so dear that anything that in the past had been worth a penny was now worth four or five pence. Moreover, both the magnates of the kingdom and the other lesser lords who had tenants, remitted something from the rents, lest the tenants should leave, because of the lack of servants and the dearth of things. Some remitted half the rent, some more and others less, some remitted it for two years, some for three, and others for one year, according as they were able to come to an agreement with their tenants. Similarly, those who received day-work form their tenants throughout the year, as is usual from serfs, had to release them and to remit such services. They either had to excuse them entirely or had to fix them in a laxer manner at a small rent, lest very great and irreparable damage be done to the buildings, and the land everywhere remain completely uncultivated. And all foodstuffs and all necessities became exceedingly dear. . . .

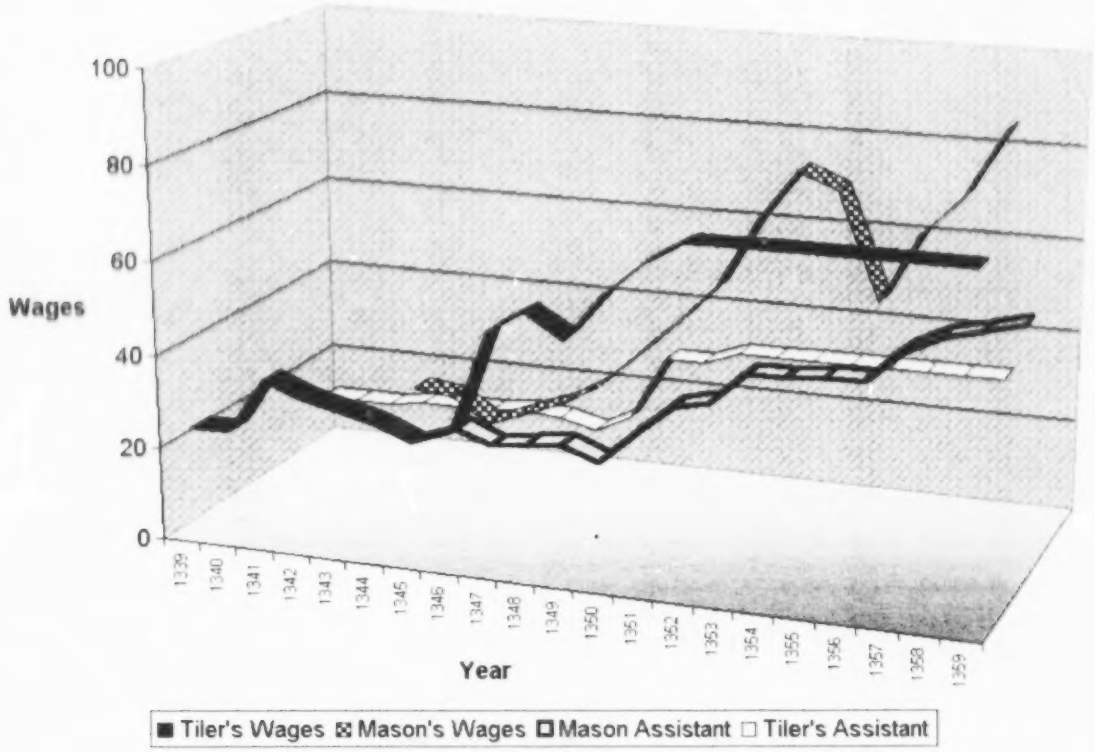
Source: Quoted in James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin, eds., *The Portable Medieval Reader* (New York: Viking Press, 1949), 218-222.

THE PRICE OF WHEAT IN PARIS



Source: Adapted from Jean Gimpel, *The Medieval Machine* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 216.

DAILY WAGES IN PARIS BUILDING TRADES IN FOUR KINDS OF JOBS



Source: Adapted from Jean Gimpel, *The Medieval Machine* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), 216.

SERFS GAIN THE UPPER HAND

Serfs did most of the work done on the lord of the manor's lands, such as raking hay, digging ditches, building fences, pruning trees, and planting and harvesting crops. As tenant farmers, serfs were not free to move away from the estate on which they were born, and they owed their lord a fixed number of days' work each year. This was a serious burden because it took away time that serfs would otherwise have spent cultivating their own fields and other farm work. In addition, they needed their lord's permission for all sorts of things, including among their daughters' marriages. They also had to make yearly payments to the lord in cash or in kind (such as hens, cloth, or honey). If the lord did not have enough serfs to get all the needed work done, he had to pay wages to hired workers.

Comparison of Labor Services Due from Serfs On 81 English Manors in 1350 and 1380

	1350 Number of manors	1380 Number of manors
No labor service due from serfs	6	40
Serfs owed an insignificant amount of labor service	9	39
Serfs' labor service made up about half of all work done	22	25
Just about all work was done by serfs owing labor service	44	22

Source: Based on information in E. Lipson, *The Economic History of England*, Vol. 1, 12th ed. (London: A. & C. Black, 1959), 95 and 97.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Unit Summary Discussion Questions and Activities

1. How significant to people's experience of the Black Death were actions of individuals? For example, Ibn al-Khatib wrote a medical treatise that insisted that the plague was spread by contagion and the English king issued the Statute of Artificers. How significant was collective action by institutions, for example, the decision by city councils to establish quarantine or to close the town to Jews? By what measures are you judging significance? What other measures of significance could be used?

2. Hold a class debate to consider what a historian would need to take into account in assessing the historical importance of the Black Death. Some issues you might want to pursue: Should "importance" be measured by how widespread the changes were resulting from the Black Death? By how many people were affected by the changes? By how seriously they were affected or for how long? By how influential the changes were in preparing the ground for other, perhaps even more radical changes in society? Does an event or process have to result in changes for it to be historically important? Are all events by definition changes? Why or why not?

3. Building on information gained from the unit, compose a historian's response to the statement by a fellow historian that "the significance of the Black Death has been greatly overrated by historians of the past. In fact, it was a passing event that, while catastrophic at the time, had little historical importance." (This activity may serve as an assessment).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Biel, Timothy Levi. *The Black Death.* San Diego: Lucent Books, 1989.

Good short reading for younger students and less able readers. Gives considerable information about medieval life and conditions as context; many brief excerpts from original sources; illustrations, glossary, suggestions for further reading for both students and teachers. 60 pages.

Campbell, Anna Montgomery. *The Black Death and Men of Learning.* New York: AMS Press, 1966.

Summaries of, and some quotations from, contemporary writings about the plague, especially medical but also from other intellectual fields; in more detail than most will want. Includes both Christian and Muslim authorities. Teacher background for the ambitious.

Deaux, George. *The Black Death.* New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969.

Useful for those looking for additional, substantial excerpts from original sources.

Dols, Michael. *The Black Death in the Middle East.* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977.

More detail than most will want, but the only reasonably accessible account of the disease outside Europe. Presents much interesting material for those willing to digest it. Teacher background. 335 pages.

Giblin, James Cross. *When Plague Strikes: the Black Death, Smallpox, AIDS.* New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Draws parallels between the practical and psychological impact of the three diseases, describing their course down to the present. Vivid and readable; for high school age students.

Gies, Frances and Joseph Gies. *Life in a Medieval Village.* New York: Harper & Row, 1990.

Vivid and non-technical yet scholarly account, focusing on one particular village. Helpful to students' understanding of the context for the Black Death. Heavily and usefully illustrated. Reasonably competent readers can enjoy it.

Herlihy, David. *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Slim and readable volume, scholarly but non-technical, with many interesting quotations from original sources. Teacher background, but good readers in 11th and 12th grade could enjoy a chapter or two. 80 pages.

McEvedy, Colin. A Bubonic Plague. *Scientific American,* 258 (1988): 118-123.

Explanation of bubonic plague in historical context. Published in a popular magazine, so good for research material.

McNeill, William H. *Plagues and Peoples.* Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1976.

Describes and analyzes from a global perspective the role played by disease in humanity's development. Chapter 6 discusses the Black Death, setting it in the context of the Mongol Empire; treats plague recurrences up until contemporary times. Good readers in high school could tackle it.

Ziegler, Philip. *The Black Death.* New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

Generally reliable overview of the subject, though written by a non-historian and confined to Europe. Parts could be assigned to competent high school readers.